

# EARLY CHILDHOOD INTERVENTION: BABIES AND TODDLERS AT RISK

## Helping Families, Saving State Resources



The Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) program provides services for very young children with significant developmental delays. ECI offers services in the home and community, providing therapeutic interventions and helping parents and caregivers better understand how to address their child's specialized needs. Services include therapies and training on social-emotional, self-help, communication, motor functions and cognitive skills. Parents are taught exercises to help a child learn to swallow, or crawl, or adjust to special needs. Intervening early in a child's life improves school readiness and decreases costs to taxpayers through reducing the need for special education and other publicly funded programs.

### ECI services

- |                               |                         |                    |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------|
| • speech therapy              | • occupational therapy  | • physical therapy |
| • feeding/swallowing          | • nutrition instruction | • counseling       |
| • specialized skills training | • case management       | • parent education |

## ECI is in Jeopardy

Program changes and reductions in funding continue to threaten this vital program. Eligibility was narrowed in 2011, resulting in missed opportunities for intervention among children with moderate delays, increased special education costs, and higher needs among those who remain eligible. These increased needs result in higher costs per child, further contributing to financial challenges. **Despite investments made in the 86<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session, per-child funding remains 10% below what it was in 2012-2015. To make matters worse, the funding level in the 2022-2023 Legislative Appropriations Request would spread the same resources even thinner.** Budgets are stretched as providers must do more with less, while working to maintain the services on which thousands of families depend.



## COVID-19 Challenges and Lessons Learned

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing challenges, decreasing referrals and making it more difficult to connect with families. ECI providers have worked tirelessly to adapt to the changing landscape, providing essential services via telehealth and conducting additional outreach with parents and families to help them get comfortable with new modes of engagement. This has also affected costs, requiring the purchase of technology such as iPads to enable families to access services. Additional staff training on new systems and remote engagement have also increased provider costs, even as the number of children referred has gone down.



Despite these challenges, ECI providers have adapted and embraced the new modalities, finding that most services can be offered through telehealth, and that many busy families enjoy the flexibility remote services can offer.

## We Must Act Now to Address the Funding Shortfall

Since 2011, 17 ECI programs have closed. In order to ensure programs can continue to provide the important and economically efficient services families need, ECI must be adequately funded. This means a per-child funding increase that would allow providers to cover costs and maintain fiscal sustainability, as well as increasing the resources necessary for identifying children who need ECI services. Children's experiences from infancy to age three profoundly affect the rest of their lives, and early intervention to address developmental challenges is the best way to help them become healthy and independent.